

“Getting it” ourselves to avoid “losing it” with our children

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It happens to us all, regardless of all our good intentions – we “lose it” with our children. Maybe it’s the end of the day and your boss was being even more demanding than usual, and when you walk through the door, your children are immediately demanding things just like your boss! Maybe it’s the same situation that repeats itself over and over and drives you up the wall – why can’t Johnny just go to bed and stay in bed for once? There’s always something, like the glass of water, bathroom trip, or new fear that keeps him unable to go to bed without you. Whatever your situation is...it happens, and when you’re in that moment, you need to help yourself so that you can also effectively help, and deal with, your children.

The first step in managing these life situations differently is to become aware of our internal triggers, and be self-reflective about our reactions. Having awareness of our own issues can help us manage our first responses, which are frequently reactive and lead to few effective teaching moments. Things such as yelling, judging, warnings, and blaming, result in everyone feeling discouraged.

Getting and managing signals

One thing we can do with regard to healthy self-management is to gain self-awareness about the physical experience of emotions, and practice allowing ourselves the time for self-care to help bring back a state of calm or balance. Essentially, because our emotions are experienced in the body, we want to learn the signals our body gives when we are getting angry, anxious, or frustrated so that we can calm ourselves or leave the situation before we “lose it.” Common physical signs of rising anger/emotion include: tight chest, clenched jaw or fists, increased heart rate, rapid/ shallow breathing, headache, stomach in knots or butterflies, neck/back tension, increased perspiration, and light-headedness. Next time you are feeling your emotions increasing, notice where you are feeling it in your body.

Once we have awareness of body cues, we are able to notice them easier and interject a “pause” of self-care to prevent an overreaction. For example, if you experience that tight jaw and increased heart rate, you want to press “pause” and do something calming or releasing that will help you to come back down and be able to function in a more balanced way with your children or others. For example,

Calming activities may include taking focused deep breaths, going to your room to gain perspective, or singing a favourite tune in your head. Releasing activities may include burning off some of that energy through yoga, a brisk walk/jog, punching a pillow, or another physical activity such as cooking or laundry. Try out a few things and see what works for you.

Once we've figured out what our body cues are and how to calm down and regain self-control, we will have increased understanding of ourselves, habits of healthy self-care (with the "pause"), and increased capability to deal with our children in a loving, teaching manner because of it. You will also be modeling these techniques for them, so they can learn how to press "pause" and calm themselves down, too. This is not an easy or spontaneous approach to our reactive responses. It takes practice, and a step-by-step plan to manage ourselves. Ask, "What will I do differently when my child refuses to cooperate, ignores me, etc?" The focus shifts from other to self and often results in positive outcomes for all.

Getting to know and accept emotions

Another loving thing we can do for ourselves is show unconditional emotional acceptance. Oftentimes, when we've "lost it" or are having some other "negative" emotion (like anxiety, hurt, anger, frustration), we jump straight into judging ourselves and beating ourselves up for having reacted or felt such things. We say, "I'm such a bad mother! Why do I have to jump at them like that?" or "I shouldn't let myself get so upset over such a little thing. I'm so dramatic." Instead, after a situation with the children, we can find a calm space and get curious about our emotional reactions – asking in a non-judgmental, gentle way what has got us feeling the way we do.

It can be very helpful to write down your responses later in the day or evening, capturing whatever comes to mind. We will often find that there are reasons we react to certain situations, and that these reasons may have been previously unknown to us. They may have something to do with memories of our own childhood, fears, or expectations we have of ourselves. Whatever your reasons, writing will help get any thoughts and feelings out, acting as an emotional release and helping to restore balance so we feel calm and have new ways to understand and change our responses as parents.

Taking this stance towards our emotions can be a major asset, to us as individuals as well as parents. Not only will we begin to understand, know, and accept ourselves more, but taking this approach to our own (irrational) emotional reactions will help us respond rather than unconsciously react to our children. If we

know that our reaction to others is really an issue for us, we can choose to work through that issue and may find that just knowing the reason for our reaction gives some relief and allows us to stay calmer when it comes up again in the future. We might simply remind ourselves, “I am feeling this way because of something in my past/about me. It’s not about today and I don’t need to react from that past. I can choose to treat this situation as a new one and experiment with different responses.” Our children watch what we do more often than they listen to what we say – being proactive in changing our responses opens up new options for them to learn the lessons they need to manage their lives with confidence.

This practice of healthy self-management will also help us accept our children when they are emotionally reacting and “losing it.” In the same way we were curious with ourselves, we can use this curiosity to help them understand their feelings better. When we can get in the habit of treating ourselves, even in our most reactive, unreasonable moments, with love and without judgment, we will ultimately begin doing this with our children. Instead of “losing it” when they are having a meltdown of their own, we can reflect their feelings (“You seem really upset!”) back to them and ask sincerely about their experiences (“Tell me more about how that was for you”) to help them tune in to their feelings and gain language, rather than behaviours, to express them. We are usually more effective responding with very young children in that we have less expectations of them, and focus on teaching and listening. These skills serve us well with children of all ages and make us feel better about our parenting experiences.

Raising our emotional awareness helps raise our children’s emotional awareness, which leads to them feeling encouraged and better equipped to avoid “losing it.” They will sense our unconditional acceptance in how we are responding to them, and as their sense of security increases and we become more attuned to them, our bond and relationships will thrive.

References:

For parenting strategies and understanding your children’s behaviour:

Honey I Wrecked the Kids, by Alyson Schafer

Raising Kids Who Can, by Betty Lou Bettner & Amy Lou

How to Talk so Kids Will Listen and Listen so Kids Will Talk, by Adele Faber & Elaine Mazlish

For self-insight around parenting:

Parenting from the Inside Out, by Daniel Siegel & Mary Hartzell

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This article originally appeared in the March 2010 issue of Capital Parent Newspaper.